

**in the dark we'll lay; in your arms, in your arms i'll  
stay by ceruleanstorm**

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**Summary:**

It's become a reflex. Holding Mike's hand. Reaching out for him because he's her anchor. Her center. Because he's the missing piece in her chaotic mess of a puzzle, and the spaces between his fingers are right where hers fit perfectly.

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**Author's Note:**

I have a love/hate relationship with this fic. it's such a hot mess. \*i'm\* such a hot mess. there are things about it i'm really proud of, but I also can't look at this anymore. also, apparently i don't know what linear is and what tense is. hope you guys like it tho!

find me on tumblr lovelies @sstrangerthaneleven

“Your hands are *freezing*, El.”

Stopping in her tracks, almost causing him to trip over, El drops her boyfriend's hand as if her touch was hurting him. (Times when it had swarmed in her mind, little whispers of past and forgiven guilt like ash in the snow)

Since her birthday last November, or her supposed birthday- Hopper and Joyce had put some effort into investigating when Jane Ives had been born only to come up short with whatever a birth certificate was (“It's basically just a piece of paper that says you were born on a certain day” Mike explained, patient at first, but she hadn't missed the “and proves you exist” he added in a low whisper, bitterness haunting his voice) and her aunt Becky had been absolutely no help – “I don't know what to tell you kid, I was probably still in Vegas at the time” she had said; in the end, she picked November 11th, a week after the anniversary of her first real night in Hawkins, Indiana- and Mike had finally “made a move” and asked her out. El still hadn't quite wrapped her brain around the concept of dating, even if everyone she knew did their best to explain how boyfriends and girlfriends were different than friends. Oh, she understood what crushes were, and she knew more than anything her racing heart and shaking hands meant she had one- and that the line was quickly blurring from crush into... something else.... But her confusion remained. There were rules to navigate, she knew, like any social situation, but how was it different? What did it change? Was a label

bad? Was that why Mike avoided them for some many years? Nancy said they- boyfriends and girlfriends- acted like she did with Jonathan and sighed a total of four times when El asked if that meant sappy. Lucas explained that boyfriends and girlfriends held hands and acted all lovey dovey (“So, sappy?” El asked and Lucas shouted “Yes!” *In Nancy’s face.*) around each other. Dustin said they “suck face” and then laughed at the face Eleven made.

They were each coming from a good place, but none of them had Mike’s uncanny super power (he blushed when she called it a super power) to explain things- and she definitely couldn’t ask him- and so the only thing their “help” did was make her more confused. Even before her birthday, El and Mike did the boyfriend and girlfriend things her friends described and she loved nothing more. Her heart beat like all the humming bird’s wings she watched in different gardens when she thought of him, and Will insisted, late nights at the dining room table waiting for Hopper and Joyce to come back from their own date, that Mike felt the same (“and then some” Will added, giggling with Jonathan before she kicked him under the table). And she could see it, plain as the sweet freckles on his face. They held hands and called each other on the phone and talked until one in the morning, chasing the nightmares far away. Mike let her “borrow” his clothes, his jackets mostly, and never complained when he never seemed to get them back. El stuck flowers and mix tapes (Will had showed her the summer before how to make them, and El found them addicting) whenever she got around to giving them back (always when December came to Hawkins and El noticed Mike was shivering all the time). He’d even kissed her a few times, nothing like how Jonathan kissed Nancy or what Dustin described. It was quick and gentle, better with practice and in secret, but still left her heart beating fast for hours and Hopper asking “What are you smiling about?” His kisses made her brave enough to steal a few quick ones of her own, little good byes after long days of long campaigns, small hellos when days would pass before they saw each other because he was too busy with school or she was busy with speech therapy or planning Joyce and Hopper’s wedding, kisses that made those adorable freckles disappear under shades of red and he’d rub the back of his neck and one time, *to her absolute horror*, he fell backwards down the basement stairs. She stopped kissing him at the top of the landing after he tripped down the stairs a second time.

But after her birthday and their first real date, El found a label changed really nothing- except now they could do boyfriend/girlfriend things in public, but she loved nothing more than calling Mike her boyfriend. Well, maybe she loved the way he smiled softly and blushed still when she called him her boyfriend more, but not by much.

“Is that bad?” El couldn’t help but hug her hands to her chest. She’s been trying to be normal, for every one’s sake, it’s just better if she tries- is this just one step back from-

“No!” Mike protests almost immediately, no hesitation to be found in his words. “Why would it be bad? It just means you probably have bad circulation, and no, that’s not a bad either, it’s just a thing, I think. Like how Dustin’s teeth didn’t come in for a while. And there was nothing wrong with him.” He reminds her.

The tension in her shoulders melts away at his kindness, and she reaches for his hand, her safety net, intertwining her fingers with his, as they set off down the train tracks again.

“Joyce has that.” She whispers in response, breaking the comfortable silence they’d settled into. The crunching the fallen leaves under winter boots and old sneakers the only sound for several miles.

“Hmm?”

“Poor circulation. Her feet are always cold and she always wears two pairs of socks.”

Mike snorts, and El swings their hands forward and back. “Your feet are pretty cold too.” He adds, almost juvenile, after a few minutes.

“I wear two pairs of socks like she does.” Sometimes three when she couldn’t sleep and four during the coldest nights of winter. Five if she couldn’t find her fuzzy ones Hopper had given to her for Christmas.

“Is that wear all my clean socks go?” Mike turns to her, his eyebrows raised, and it’s a few more silent seconds before she nods, biting her lip, and his laughter fills and echoes in the silent woods and off rusted train tracks.

“Do you want them back?” El asks, embarrassment bleeding into her voice, but he squeezes her hand and shakes his head.

“No, it’s okay. Your frozen feet need them more than me. It’s for a good cause.” He smiles that goofy grin at her and El’s heart starts to beat too fast. “My mom does keep asking why she’s always having to buy me more.”

It’s El’s turn to laugh and it has him laughing with her and El suddenly doesn’t remember that they’ve been in through hell and back just to be here having a stupid boyfriend/girlfriend conversation about socks (socks she’s stealing- and not going to stop stealing, if it makes him laugh, she decides, the fate of Mike Wheeler’s socks set).

“Yeah, it does makes sense that Mrs. Byers has poor circulation. Like Will has it too, really bad. He used to, and he still does this, just come up behind you and just put his *ice cold* hands on your face. He thinks it’s hysterical. Seriously- *your* hands might be the only ones colder than his.” As if to prove just how cold her hands are, he brings them up to his face, blowing hot air on them. She can see his breath dance around his red nose in the frosty February atmosphere- he never stops to think that maybe the weather had anything to do with it- and smiles as his eyebrows crease and his nose scrunches up and he rubs his hands in between hers.

“Is that better?” asks Mike, concern in those beautiful brown eyes of his.

Shrugging and feigning innocence, El answers by placing her palms on his cheeks and giggling when he jumps three feet back.

“*Jesus*, El!” Mike laughs. “I should not have given you that idea!” In a split second, his slight stumble turns into a fall as his sneakers catch on the train tracks and he fails his arms, heading backwards and landing in a pile of leaves.

“Mike!” El follows after him, diving into the leaves and landing beside him on the tracks where he fell.

“It’s okay, I’m okay, I promise.” Mike smiles up at her again, their noses touching, and her hair in his face. The significance of his words

is not lost on her, and even though she's smiling, she punches him in the shoulder. "You and your cold hands."

"Mouth breather." She doesn't mean it, and her words are giddy and light as she laughs, and he reaches for her hand again. Electricity passes through her, like bottled lightning, as she pulls him up.

It's become a reflex. Holding Mike's hand. Reaching out for him because he's her anchor. Her center. Because he's the missing piece in her chaotic mess of a puzzle, and the spaces between his fingers are right where hers fit perfectly.

Ever since that night, the night of her last time in the Bath, the night of promises of a school dance and home of her own and their first real kiss... ever since the night of unspoken secrets and sacrifices she wouldn't for a second take back, holding Mike's hand, locking her fingers in between his, meant something different. With Papa, with the doctors, touch was bad. A punishment. Touch wasn't safe. Touch meant pain. And Mike... Mike was none of those things. He was warmth and understanding and kindness and hope. And everything had changed the night he kissed her; she might not have understood what it meant then, but she does now, and she knows that something changed when he took her hand as they run and run and run from the Bad Men and the Demogorgon. *We're in this together, I promise.* It's different when she is laying on the table, his promises and the frantic voices of her new friends the only thing tying her to the fading world around her, and she reaches for his hand and he's right there to take it.

It changed then and it changed again when El came back. Intimacy and touch are difficult- but almost addicting like a thunderstorm after a drought- after so many months in the dark and in the cold and nothingness, but Mike's patient, and still kind as ever, waiting until she's ready, until she reaches out for him.

Four years later they're still drawn together like magnets in a compass to the north, conversations silently passed between them, fingers intertwined.

*I'm here.*

*It's okay.*

*Just hold on a little longer.*

*Have you eaten today?*

*Did you sleep last night at all?*

*A flashback? Do you want to talk about it?*

*You're not really going to eat that entire thing right?*

*Don't worry, I have extra tissues in my pocket.*

*Please tell me you brought Eggo's.*

*Promise?*

*Promise.*

The tracks are holy ground underneath as they keep walking. Mike's been quiet, and El shivers, making her worrier of a boyfriend shoot her a silent look, and squeeze her hand. She squeezes back. It's one of those rare occasions where it's just the two of them. Not just facing the world, but enjoying it, not fighting it, just being in each other's presence. No curious moms or protective surrogate dads or friends quick to teasing or siblings who always had a comment. Will's either at band practice or staying late to work on his big art project (El's pestered him about it because she knows it's for Joyce and Hopper's wedding, and feels like she has a right to know, but he keeps his mouth shut- *worst step brother ever*). She knows Dustin is doing a job called stage manager for the high school's upcoming musical and that Lucas is stuck helping him because Lucas has done nothing but complain about it for the past four weeks, making fun of Dustin in voices that have El in tears and clutching her stomach from laughter..

A cold breeze bites her nose and sends chills up her spine, and she takes a step closer to the boy who walks with her, and he's there, rubbing her hands again trying to warm them up. She thinks she loves him then.

The start of the spring semester in full swing, it's been four days since

she's talked to Mike. El can see the darkening circles under his eyes; his sophomore year he followed in Nancy's footsteps and convinced the counselor that he, along with Dustin, could take the college level physics course they offered at his high school. El always admired his affinity for science, still believing in its strength after all these years, but she's sat with him at the Wheeler's kitchen counter as he runs his fingers through his hair over and over and over staring at the same problem. She's been on the other side of the Super Com as he pulls all-nighters, talking himself through a chapter in that *stupid* text book (El's thrown it across the room several times when his back is turned, and it's worth the nose bleed and migraine when he laughs and the light comes back to his eyes, takes her hand, and digs clean tissues out of his pocket.) El's proud of him, but hates how he's exhausted and falling asleep during campaigns and on her lap during movie marathons and just wants him to get some rest.

She bites her lip as they follow the bend of the tracks. It's the lack of sleep that's keeping him quiet, she knows how exhaustion steals words all too well. Silence is okay between them, but suddenly El is wishing she hadn't suggested they go on a walk and just curled up with him on the nearest couch so he could sleep.

Mike hadn't been working on physics when she found him that afternoon. The walk over from Hopper's is peaceful and she says hi to the old lady always gardening and Donald from the grocery store and Officer Powell, off giving someone a parking ticket. The front door of the Wheeler House is unlocked, as if it is waiting for her, and she walks in to find Holly in the living room brushing the Wheeler's new corgi, Zoe the Thing of Horror (the name is still lost on El) , Holly jumps up, scaring the dog whose ears stick straight up, and runs to give El a hug. Mike's voice floats from the kitchen.

"Yeah, yeah." He sounds irritated, that familiar tell in his voice filling her with concern and worry for her boyfriend. "Mhmm, yeah, Dustin. No, you already said that. Yes, I heard you the first time."

Holly leading her, El rounds the corner and dances into the kitchen. Mike's leaned over the counter, the house phone in one hand, running the other through his wild hair. On those days he fell asleep on her lap, she often found herself playing with his hair, and said nothing when he woke up and wondered why it looked more like



Chewbacca than usual.

Mike doesn't notice his sister, or his girlfriend, for a few seconds, and continues on with his argument with Dustin. "That's a stupid idea! And aren't you the one always saying if you feed that much electricity into something it will burst into flames? Yeah, okay, that one fire was my fault, but still..." He trails off.

Holly comes to stand near El, rolling her eyes. "He's been on the phone for forty minutes."

"Is everything okay?" whispers El.

Shrugging, Holly starts to fix her long blonde ponytail. The only Wheeler without dark hair, El sometimes looks at Holly and sees the blonde wig, and almost giggles at the memory. "Something with Dustin." Her front teeth are missing and El wants to laugh at how much she sounds like the Dustin she first knew. Mom's yelled at him four times and" in a fast blur, Holly whips her hand over her head, sending El a few feet back. El runs through her mental list of sayings and idioms and metaphors and slang she's been taught in the past few years, and oh, right over his head.

"Then tell Lucas to turn the voltage down. Okay, then tell him I said to turn the voltage down."

"Mike!" shouts Holly, sending El backwards again and the phone flying from Mike's hand.

"*What, Holly?*" He looks up and shouts, matching Holly's volume perfectly. She'll never truly get used to how loud Mike's family could be. Hopper was always quiet- except when he snores, and the Byers almost never raised their voices; the Wheelers yelled *everything*.

Then Mike catches sight of her standing there, and his brown eyes light up, and she can't help the smile on her face.

"Hey."

"Hey," he repeats, the same breathless way he said it when she came back from the Upside Down.

They've dated for four months now, but the butterflies are still strong from four years, and time stands still in the kitchen as they look at each other. She can see the tired look in his eyes sharp in the light of the kitchen and the way his shoulders slump more than usual. Suddenly, there's a wish in her that she could take that way, use her powers to ease his exhaustion and-

It's Holly who breaks the moment, in a way, that Eleven has been told, is a very seven year old thing to do. "Ugh!" her nose curls up and she sticks her tongue out. "You two *always* stare at each other like that and it's gross!"

Mike just rolls his eyes and picks the phone back up. "Hey? Yeah, I'm still here. What happened? Holly happened. Listen, Dustin, I have to go-" he stops, running his hand through his hair and mouthing "help me," and El bites her lip, trying not to laugh, "No, Dustin, El's here! I'm hanging up now- Dustin! Yes, I think she's still coming to the play Saturday! Well, she won't be able to if you let Lucas burn the school down! Okay, bye!"

"Lucas is going to burn the school down?" El's voice hangs in the kitchen as she comes to stand by him, and their hands find each other immediately. Holly sticks her tongue out and Mike copies her.

"I hope not. They're having a problem with the lights board for the play, and Lucas got this dumb idea to rewire it and I think he might of fried the thing." He leans his head on her shoulder and yawns, his cute face scrunching up. She takes hold of his other hand.

"They're going to burn the school down."

"Oh yeah." Mike confirms, nodding into her shoulder. He's so much taller than she is, so the distance is almost awkward, but perfect in it's own way. "I haven't seen you in like forever." he mumbles. She squeezes his hands and kisses the top of his head, watching Holly gag from out of the corner of her eye. El likes Holly, and she's the closest thing she has to a little sister, but she could stand to be with Mike, alone.

"Wedding planning." whispers El, a soft reminder.

"Yeah, Will told me you guys went up to Bloomington last weekend. How was that?"

"Okay. Joyce let me pick out my bridesmaid dress."

She can feel him smiling into the fabric of her sweater. "Let me guess. Pink?"

"Purple, mouth breather." El sticks her tongue out, and he laughs into her shoulder.

"So close!"

"It's Joyce's favorite color. And Will wants us all to match."

"That's awesome." he yawns, and then whispers for only her ears, "You smell good."

She squeezes his hand again, the charm bracelet he got her for her birthday jingling. "Mike, when was the last time you got any sleep?"

"Last night, two hours."

"Mike-"

"I'm okay, El." He squeezes her hand, finally looking at her and she can't help but believe him when he looks at her with his big brown eyes, the ones she could lost in. "Promise, okay? C'mon, I haven't seen you in a week, I can just crash later."

There's the basement couch waiting down stairs, and fleece blankets, but El looks at him again and knows he'll protest. Her mind wanders to all the nights he begged her to try and sleep, when nightmares and flashbacks followed her into the shadows of her little bedroom of Hopper's lake house. His voice like clarity in the radio static, reminding her that he was right there, and she was safe with Hopper, and that everything would be okay, and that in the morning they would be able to hang out with Dustin and Lucas and Will- she just had to make it through the dark hours until the dawn.

As if reading her thoughts, he presses a kiss to her forehead, just as she had done when his head was resting on her shoulders.

“Promise?” she whispers, jingling the bracelet.

“Promise.”

“Ga- ROSS!” Holly yells, and Mike whirls on his heel, but doesn’t drop her hand.

“Do you *ever* stop?” Mike yells back, but El knows he doesn’t mean the anger in his voice.

“No.” Holly shakes her head, smiling a toothless smile. “Are you two going to kiss? Is this what Mom says I’ll understand when I’m older?”

Suddenly Mike is dragging Eleven by her hand across the kitchen. “Well, if you don’t want to watch us kiss then we’ll leave.”

“Where are you going?” Holly yells back, but she’d already made a beeline for the phone.

“Out!”

“What if Dustin calls back?”

El laughs, knowing full well, Holly had about nine minutes before the phone rang again with Dustin on the other line..

“You can handle it!” Mike shouts out one last time before they were walking out the door, nodding at El. Holly, despite her hair, took after her siblings in almost every other way, super smart and super loud.

There hadn’t been too much kissing as they walked along the train tracks, no destination in mind. Just the other boyfriend/girlfriend things Nancy and Lucas and Dustin talked about. The hand holding and the teasing as they walked along the rusty bends and fallen leaves. Spring was on the horizon, and El could feel it in the air, but winter still claimed the ground.

“Mike?” she whispers but his name still echoes in the woods, and he squeezes her hand again.

“Are you going to ask me to buy you gloves?” he laughs, smiling

wide, before she bumps him in the shoulder.

“Do you want me to stop holding your hand?” El threatens. She’s holding back laughter and watching the horrified look that comes over his face as he pulls her hand closer, like a child who has not interest in sharing. *He’s adorable*, she thinks to herself.

“No!” Mike insists, knowing he now has to make up for lost ground. “Your cold hands are like, my favorite thing about you!”

El narrows her eyes, and he bursts into laughter. Suddenly she’s warm despite the winter. Bringing her hands back to his to try his earlier attempt at warming them up, El knows this is going to become a habit of his, and her heart beats faster and faster, before she remembers her question.

“Why are you taking this physics class?”

He looks at her with wide eyes. She inwardly curses for her timing, she’s had trouble and doesn’t know if it will ever get better, with when to say things and how to say things. The speech therapist tells her she will- eventually- but, but it’s so easy to doubt. But then he’s smiling softly and he hasn’t let go of her hands. “Um, I don’t know...” Mike trails off, shrugging.

“You’re tired.” is all she says.

“Yeah, but-” he sighs, and shakes his head before he can look at her again, “-half of it’s Dustin, you know? He wanted to take the class but he didn’t want to take it by himself and I don’t know, chem has been a breeze so it’s good I have a challenging class.”

Her heart fills with adoration. Of course Mike would take the class because Dustin asked him to, without hesitation, just like he’d jump off the edge of a quarry. But she can’t save him from the drop this time.

“And I was thinking,” El looks up at him, but he’s not looking at her anymore, his glance off to the side and his cheeks bright red. “You see if I take an extra science this year and an extra math and history next year they might let me graduate a semester early.”

“Oh.” She didn’t know he wanted to graduate early. “For school?” El can’t say the word college.

Mike shrugs. He’s running his thumb over the tops of her knuckles. She waits. “I don’t know. Maybe. But maybe for work, too, I could get a job before I apply so I have a little extra money... And...”

“And?”

“There’s you.” It’s a whisper. A mumble, and she almost misses it.

“Me?” El asks. Willing him to look at her, she squeezes Mike’s hand. Please trust me.

Trust me like I trusted you.

He gets the message.

“Yeah, you. If I graduate early I have like a whole five months to spend with you, plus summer. And you wouldn’t be so lonely because I wouldn’t be stuck for seven hours at school. That’s a dream, to be with you, instead of at school. Plus, next year I’ll have enough honors classes for an off hour.” as he explains, Mike becomes braver and braver, he’s trying to warm her hands again, and she’s melting at his words even in the chill of the air.

“What’s an off hour?” El asks, this time running her thumb over his knuckles.

“I don’t have to take all six classes so I can either have first period off or last period off.” Mike explains, using that gentle tone she’s come to be so expectant of when she doesn’t understand, “I was thinking last period, that way I could go home, get a head start on campaigns, homework, play with Zoe...”

El knows his next thought, but it comes out as doubt. As a question. “And be with me?”

“Well, yeah.” he smiles, and even though there still walking, he leans until their foreheads are touching. “If Hopper ever lets you out of the house.” Mike adds in a whisper a few seconds later and she bursts into laughter.

“What would we do? With your off hour?” El squeezes hand, he’s moving a piece of hair behind her ear.

“I dunno. What do you want to do?”

*This*, she thinks, their foreheads touching, their fingers intertwined, his hand in her hair, but she can’t resist the urge to tease him. “We could always kiss in front of Holly so she can pretend to vomit.”

That earns her a famous Mike Wheeler eye roll and has her laughing again.

“Mike, I love that you want to do this for Dustin and for me,” *almost as much as I love you*, but she isn’t quite ready to say that, “but I don’t know- I don’t know...” after all these years words still escape her, her inability to contain the infinity of language a reminder of her arcane past, but he’s patient, waiting, squeezing her hand until the words come to her, “if it’s worth it.”

Self doubt bleeds into every word she speaks, and Mike doesn’t miss it for a second.. He just laughs- at her. “It’s worth it, El. Or it will be, even if I’m-”

“Exhausted and falling asleep all the time and getting sick a lot and look paler.”

A look of astonishment comes over his face, and El bites her lip. It’s almost like she can hear him thinking that that was just a whole ton of words that came out of her mouth, more than usual. When he speaks, it sounds like he’s trying not to laugh *more*.

“Are you- have you been worried about me?” he breaks down into chuckles, grabbing both her hands again before throwing his head back into full blown laughter.

All El wants to do is punch him in the shoulder. She can’t believe him. Why was he laughing at *her*? She was being *serious*. Oh, she was going to kill him, that mouth breather. “Yes. Yes, I am. As your girlfriend,” El pauses because the word grabs his attention, “I’m worried sick about you.” Trying to muster all the authority she can, she mimics Joyce’s phrase, her favorite to use when El starts shuts

down or Will is out past ten or Jonathan goes a few days without calling or Hopper is taking on too much at the station. El blinks- she has a weird family. Not as weird as her boyfriend- who was *still laughing at her* - apparently.

Mike wipes tears away from his eyes with the back of his hand, and takes a deep breath. "I'm sorry I worried you, El."

"It's okay," their hands find each other again. "Jackass." she adds, under her breath, for good measure, sending Mike into another round of laughter. When she does it right, and when he's not laughing at her her, El feels like fireworks are exploding in her chest whenever she can make her boyfriend laugh. Especially when he's so tired and more irritable, snapping at everyone and yelling at Dustin on the phone.

"You used a curse word right!" Mike praises, adoration in his eyes. "Dustin and Lucas are going to be so proud of you, and they thought you were a lost cause!"

They laugh, time around them still and bending to their will. It feels right, and after all the universe has one to them, El believes they deserve it. They deserve this moment.

"I wish I knew how to take some of the workload off for physics. I'm not having fun, either and I have no idea how Dustin is faring, with the play and all." Running a free hand through his hair, Mike sighs.

"You don't have to quit." she tells him. El doesn't want that, and she won't get in the way of school, El promised the Wheelers, when they approached her about dating their son and what that meant (Mike knows nothing of the conversation, and she wants to keep it that way, the sinking feeling the Wheelers do not approve of their son's choice of a girlfriend gnawing at the back of her cluttered mind) "Sleep. You need sleep."

Mike's shoulders slump and he nods. "I know, I know. And I'm trying."

"Two hours isn't good enough."



“Umm, how about three?”

She narrows her eyes. “Five.”

“Three and a half?” This brings on *the* glare, and he caves.

“Fine. Four.”

“Promise?”

A sigh, then a smile. “Promise.”

El will take it for now. And if she has to rearrange the physics teacher’s room in the future, she can cross that bridge when she gets there. But right now, there’s Mike, holding her cold hands, making promises he’ll do everything he can to keep. Her heart beats a little faster, and suddenly- suddenly, she’s feeling brave. El looks up at her boyfriend, and then at their hands.

Nancy calls it flirting, what El wants to say. *“Boyfriends and girlfriends do it.”*

*“You said flirting was because you liked someone who you wanted to be your boyfriend or girlfriend.”*

*“You can still flirt with someone when they’re dating.”*

*“That doesn’t make sense.”*

*“I know, I know. Just trust me, okay? Mike will probably think it’s cute- okay who am I kidding Mike thinks everything you do is like the equivalent of walking on water. Man, Jonathan really needs to step up his game.”*

El feels like she’s trying to balance herself on a pair of Nancy’s heels when she says his name and he looks at her with those beautiful brown eyes, but she giggles and says it anyway. “You should give me a sneak peak of your off hour.” El winks- or tries to because she still can’t do one eye by itself- and he laughs once more.

“Are you trying to flirt with me again?” Mike asks, smiling widely. Her last disastrous attempt comes to both their minds, and El

suddenly regrets ever asking Nancy for advice on what girlfriends did.

“Maybe.”

His eyes crinkle when he laughs and presses his forehead to hers once more. “Well, it’s working.”

“Shut up and kiss me, Mike.”

It’s forceful, but he laughs before saying okay and does as he’s told. Time is infinite on these train tracks, one her cold hands on his neck and the other in his own hand as he tilts her head back, fingers entangled in her hair. She sighs softly into the kiss, and pulls him closer, thinking about how much better they’ve gotten at this. *If this his off hour, she grins, ... then maybe I can accept the physics.*

El’s not sure who pulls away first, (“Holly would be dry heaving,” Mike jokes in a whisper, and the both fall onto each other in laughter) but then she looks up at him and sees his glowing smile, and suddenly she’s leading him off the tracks and deeper into the woods.

“Where are we going?” he asks. and she squeezes his hand.

“Off the rails.” she looks back at her boyfriend, throwing him a smile and he bursts into laughter again.

“Haven’t we both been there already?” Mike laughs, instantly shielding himself when she turns around, glaring.

Finding a spot where the leaves are high and the branches overhead cover them from the pink light of a gently setting sun, El sits down, tugging her boyfriend down with her by his hand. “Lay down, okay?” she tells him, but he furrows his eyebrows and stays sitting up.

“I told you, El, I’ll just crash later, I don’t want to ruin our date by sleeping.” Mike eyes their still intertwined fingers and runs his thumb over her knuckles again. He opens his mouth to protest more, but El stops him with a hand on his cheek.

“It’s okay. You need sleep. And I didn’t sleep last night either-” The

look of worry is there in his eyes instantly, and she bites back a smile, “-so we’ll just sleep now.”

“In this pile of leaves?”

“Mhmm.”

“I’m probably going to snore,” he tells her, making her giggle.

“It’s cute.”

He blushes a cherry red. “El-”

“Mike Wheeler, *lay down in the leaves.*” She looks at him, the glare in her eyes, that he knows means that if she has to use her powers she will, and Mike bursts into laughter, but follows her as she lays down, laying his head in the crook of her neck.

“I guess this is something that just comes with having a pretty telekinetic girlfriend.” he half whispers, half laughs, finding her hand again.

“Mouth breather.” she whispers, even though she’s running her free fingers through his hair and thinking about how she wouldn’t trade this moment for anything. Knowing he wouldn’t either.

“Yeah,” he snorts, “but I’m your mouth breather, cold hands.”

She kisses his forehead, “You are.”

Words aren’t needed after that, and Mike has dozed off quickly, as El knew he would. She listens to his breathing and his sweet snoring for what feels like some perfect eternity she doesn’t for a second think she deserves, her own eyes getting heavy. He’s still holding her hand.

They’re two dancing points in the universe, brought together by misfortune and monsters and miracles, and she’s very broken and is doing everything in her power to make sure this world doesn’t break him, staying together through sheer force of will and loneliness, and she can safely say love too, because it’s hard not to love him right now, hard not believe he loves her after all he’s done. So they stay together. Against the universe, and whatever forces dare try to tear

them apart. They are lost stars bonded together in a pile of leaves by the hands they hold.

She doesn't plan on ever letting go.

### **Author's Note:**

should i stay or should i go mixtape// in your arms;  
kina grannis

it's one of my favorite songs for high school mileven

ALSO THE DOG! The corgi I gave the Wheelers- if the Duffer Brothers can make shameless references to Stephen King then SO CAN I! (her name was almost molly, but i thought that sounded too much like holly and millie- wait a second... holyshitijustuncoveredaconspiracy

I would love feedback! Tell me what you think of this hot mess (the fic, let me clarify- not me)Also if you have asked for a fic or prompt they are coming! I promise!

Xoxo- Savannah